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THE TOMAHAWK

By WILLIAM H. HOLMES

In preparing a brief article on the "tomahawk" for the *Handbook of American Indians*, much difficulty was experienced in the effort to obtain an adequate conception of the implement or implements to which the term referred originally and in early Colonial times. References to the tomahawk in the literature of the period are meager and contradictory, as shown by the several citations brought together in the following pages. The term was apparently first recorded in Captain John Smith's brief Indian vocabulary¹ prepared some time during the years 1607-09, where it appears as —

tomahacks, axes [presumably English axes] ;

while in the same connection we have

tockahacks, pickaxes [presumably English pickaxes],

monacookes, swords [presumably English swords].

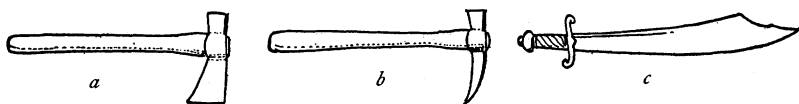


FIG. 79. — *a*, English ax. *b*, English pickax. *c*, English sword.

Strachey,² who was secretary of the Jamestown Colony (1610-1612), gives the following terms and definitions :

tamohake, a hatchet [presumably an English hatchet].

tacchacan, a hatchet [presumably an English hatchet].

tamahaac, a hatchet [presumably an English hatchet].

monowhawk, a sword [presumably an English sword].

cunsenagwus, an Indian hatchet.

It would appear that these several names, except the last, were the Indian names for the English implements and weapons of the time (fig. 79), *cunsenagwus* being presumably the Indian name for

¹ Smith, *Travels, Adventures and Observations*, vol. 1, p. 147, reprint 1819.

² *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia*, Hakluyt Soc. Pub., 1849, p. 188, 190, 194.

the native stone implement corresponding most closely to the English hatchet, possibly the celt-hatchet or the grooved ax, or both (fig. 80).

The word *tomahaucks* occurs in Arber's edition of Smith's Works, page cxiii (Spelman, *circa* 1613), but the context is not clear, and its significance and application are therefore uncertain.¹ It may have referred to either a stone hatchet or any other kindred weapon.



FIG. 80. — *a*, Indian celt-hatchet. *b*, Indian grooved ax.

Other statements by Smith² and Strachey,³ relating to the weapons of the Indians, are not more helpful as the word *tomahawk* is not mentioned. Strachey's words, "a long stone sharpened at both ends," may have referred to the stone hatchet-blade or celt, but do not accurately describe it (fig. 81); but the use of the implement as a hatchet for felling trees or cutting massy things asunder makes it practically certain that the reference was to the blade of the celt-hatchet, or otherwise to the grooved ax blade, or to the roughly sharpened stones so common in the Potomac region.

In only one case in the literature of the Virginia colonies, so far as noted, is the word *tomahawk* in any of its forms applied definitely

¹ "The weopons they vse for offence are Bowes and Arrowes with a weopon like a hammer and ther Tomahaucks for defence [?] which are [?] shields made of the barke of a tree and hanged on ther leaft shoulder to couer that side as they stand forth to shoote."

² "For their wars also they vse Targets that are round and made of the barks of trees, and a sworde of wood at their backs, but oftentimes they vse for swords the horne of a Deare put through a peece of wood in forme of a pickaxe. Some a long stone sharpened at both ends, vsed in the same manner. This they were wont to vse also for hatchets, but now by trucking they haue plentie of the same forme of yron. And those are their chiefe instruments and armes." — Smith's *Map of Virginia*, Oxford, 1612, part I, p. 23; also Arber's *Smith*, 1884, p. 364.

³ "Some use a long stone sharpened at both ends, thrust through a handle of wood in the same manner, and these last they were wont to use instead of hatchetts to fell a tree, or cut any massy thing in sonder; but now, by trucking with us, they have thowsands of our iron hatchetts, such as they be." — Strachey's *Virginia*, p. 106, Hakluyt Society Pub., 1849.

to the Indian celt-hatchet or to any other native implement, and that is by Beverley, a hundred years later. This author states that "when they wanted any Land to be clear'd of the Woods, they chopp'd a Notch round the Trees quite through the Bark with their Stone Hatchets, or Tomahawks, and that deaden'd the Trees, . . . but now for all these uses they employ Axes, and little Hatchets which they buy of the English."¹ This statement, which associates the

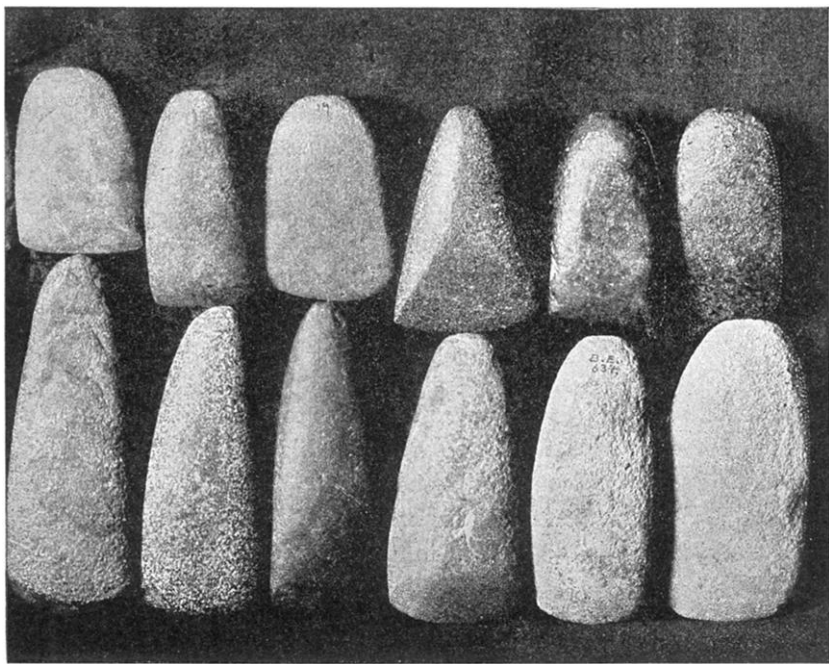


FIG. 81. — Typical celt-hatchet forms of the Potomac-Chesapeake region.

Indian name for the English hatchet, as recorded by Smith and Strachey, with the native stone hatchet (*cunsenagrævus*), is strangely at variance with a very explicit statement found on an earlier page of the same work. Describing a clandestine visit to one of the houses of worship of the Virginia Indians, Beverley says :

We found large Shelves, and upon these Shelves three Mats, each of which was roll'd up, and sow'd fast. These we handed down to the light, and to

¹ Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia*, 1705, book III, p. 61.

save time in unlacing the Seams, we made use of a Knife, and ripp'd them, without doing any damage to the Mats. In one of these we found some vast Bones, which we judg'd to be the Bones of Men, particularly we measur'd one Thigh-bone, and found it two foot nine inches long : In another Mat, we found some Indian Tomahawks finely grav'd, and painted. These resembl'd the wooden Falchion us'd by the Prize-fighters in England, except that they have no guard to save the Fingers. They were made of a rough heavy Wood, and the shape of them is represented in the Tab. 10. No. 3. Among these Tomahawks was the largest that ever I saw ; there was fasten'd to it a Wild Turkey's Beard painted red, and two of the longest Feathers of his wings hung dangling at it, by a string of about 6 inches long, ty'd to the end of the Tomahawk.¹ [See Fig. 82, a.]

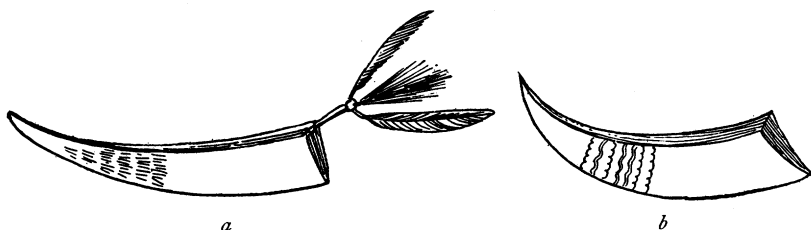


FIG. 82. — *a*, Tomahawk shown in Beverley's plate 10. *b*, Tomahawk illustrated in Knox's *Voyages*, vol. II., 1767, plate opposite p. 165.

That the falchion-like implements here described with such minuteness were classed with the tomahawks of the Virginia Indians of that time is made clear by the illustration of the implement introduced into plate 10 of Beverley's work (see 3, fig. 83). This plate represents a native man and his wife at dinner, and was made up from Hariot's² plates 15 and 16, as Hariot's plate had been in turn copied with wilful inaccuracy from John White's drawing (now in the British Museum), made at Roanoke about 1585. The drawing of the tomahawk is referred to in the description of the Beverley plate as "The Tomahawk, which he lays by at Dinner."

In this connection the following lines from Hariot are suggestive :

Those weapo's that they haue are onlie bowes made of Witch-hazle, and Arrowes of reeds ; flat edged truncheons also of wood about a yard long.³

This seems to indicate that aside from the bow and arrow the only weapon of the Roanoke Indians was the falchion-like wooden

¹ Beverley, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

² Hariot, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, 1590.

³ Hariot, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

club, and leads to the implication that the stone celt-hatchet was not regarded as a weapon, if, indeed, it was known at all among these Indians. The only observed indication that the celt-hatchet was known at Roanoke is found in plate XIX of Hariot, where, associated with a feasting scene, is depicted a man engaged apparently in splitting wood for the fire with an implement of this character, which, however, may be the English ax, doubtless even thus early introduced among the Indians. That the celt-hatchet was not an ordinary weapon among the tribes of Virginia is indicated by a similar statement by Strachey to the effect that "their weapons of offence are bowes and arrowes and wodden swords."¹



FIG. 83. — Plate 10 of Beverley, with illustration [3] of "The Tomahawk, which he lays by at Dinner."

It is worthy of particular note that nearly all the illustrations employed in the works of Smith and Strachey are made up from the Roanoke Colony drawings of John White, executed between the years 1585 and 1590, excepting the scene in Smith depicting the saving of Smith's life by Pocahontas. Even the figures in this picture are plagiarized from White, whose drawings represent the Croatans of North Carolina, not the Powhatans of Virginia. It

¹Strachey, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

may be further noted that in the scene depicting the saving of Smith by Pocahontas the executioners flourish weapons of two classes (fig. 84), one the globe-headed club, the other a pick-like implement that answers in a way the description of the native "sword" with a

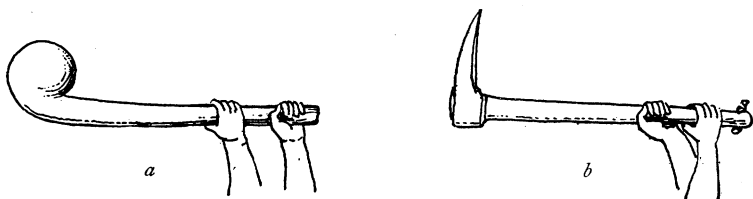


FIG. 84. — Weapons depicted in Smith's plate illustrating the saving of Smith's life by Pocahontas.

sharp stone or antler spike. The first of these weapons is not even referred to by any of the colonial writers of Virginia. Again, it is seen that Beverley, without anywhere acknowledging the fact, makes up his plates from those of White, Smith, and other early writers, and although nearly all of these represent the Roanoke Indians, and the activities, customs, style of dress, etc., of that people, he suits his descriptions of Virginia aborigines to them, interpolating certain observations of his own relating to the latter Indians. This is doubtless due to the understanding on his part that the Powhatans had customs, arts, etc., identical with those of the Roanoke island natives.

In just what way Beverley fell into the inconsistency regarding the tomahawk, which he first describes from his own observations and illustrates as a falchion-like club of wood, and later refers to as the Indian stone ax, it is difficult to conjecture.¹ If his evidence should be thrown out entirely on account of its contradictory nature, then we have remaining of the original colonial Virginia evidence, only that of Smith and Strachey, which makes the word *tomahawk* apply to the English ax or hatchet, and the term *cunsenagwus* to the Indian stone hatchet. It will be necessary to determine the

¹ Beverley says in his preface: "I am an Indian"; and again, "I have added Fourteen Copper Plates, to illustrate the Dress, and Way of Living of the Natives, the Draughts of which were taken exactly from the Life. Herein, as well as throughout the whole Book, I have been very scrupulous, not to insert anything, but what I can justify, either by my own Knowledge, or by credible Information."

etymology of these terms ere we can gain any further insight into their application. For the discussion of this phase of the investigation we shall have to depend on Mr W. R. Gerard, who is a close student of Algonquian etymologies.

The Smith illustrations have little ethnological value, as the artist has introduced Smith into compositions made up of figures of Roanoke Indians borrowed from John White; and the figure of the "great King of Pamunkey," captured by Smith by seizing him by the hair,¹ is merely a bad copy of one of White's figures. In the works of Smith, Strachey, and Beverley there is no single figure drawn from the Powhatans, and no costume, implement, ornament, or other object of art derived from the belongings of that people. All are plagiarized, with one apparent exception, from John White's original drawings or from Hariot's reproductions of these, or some other outside source, the exception being the drawing of the tomahawk in Beverley's plate 10, which represents the implement seen and described by Beverley himself. The graphic representations of New England authors are even less representative of the real natives of that section, and the record of the Massachusetts Indians, pictorial and descriptive, is so meager that the commonwealth of Massachusetts is not able to obtain a reasonably correct drawing of an Indian in costume for use on its seal. It is thus seen that the drawings of John White are the most accurate and important graphic representations of the native tribes of the Atlantic slope, and indeed they are nearly all we have to show us what the Indians of colonial days were like.

The earliest observed reference to the *tomahawk* by the colonists of the New Netherlands is that of Van der Donck (about 1650), as follows:

Their weapons formerly were bows and arrows, with a *war-club* hung to the arm, and a square shield which covered the body up to the shoulders; . . . At present many of them use fire arms, which they prize highly and learn to use dexterously. They spare no pains in procuring guns and ammunition, for which they trade with the Christians at a dear rate. At present they also use *small axes (tomahawks)* instead of their *war-clubs*.²

¹ Arber's *Smith*, plate opposite page 343.

² Van der Donck, New Netherlands, 1656, in *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, 2d ser., 1, 1841, p. 211.

Here it is clear that the term applies specifically to the European small ax or hatchet.

In the colonial literature of New England the earliest mention of the tomahawk noted is that by Wood, in the following lines :

Tamahaukes be staves of two foote and a halfe long, and a knob at one end as round and bigge as a foote-ball.¹

In a recent article Bushnell furnishes the following interesting item :

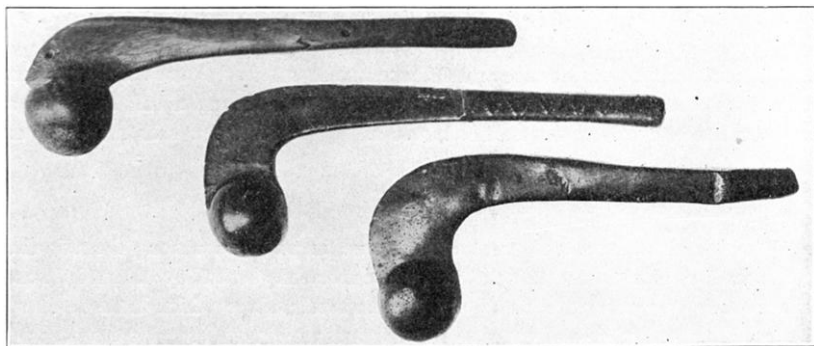


FIG. 85. — Three clubs, catalogued as tomahawks. Tradescant Collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

In the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, among the specimens which formerly belonged to the old Tradescant collection, are three clubs from North America (A, B, C, plate G). These are of great interest, as they are, without doubt, the oldest existing examples of that type of weapon. On p. 46 of the small printed catalogue [of the Tradescant collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford] is a reference to "*Tomahacks, 6 Sorts.*" The three specimens now in the Ashmolean Museum were probably included in this entry.²

Illustrations of the three are given in figure 85.

In 1674 Gookin wrote as follows :

Their weapons were bows and arrows, *clubs*, and *tomahawks*, made of wood like a *pole ax*, with a sharpened stone fastened therein, and for defence, they had targets made of barks of trees.³

¹ Wood, *New England's Prospect*, 1635, p. 50.

² Notes on Certain Clubs from North America, by David I. Bushnell, Jr, *Man*, London, 1907, no. 59.

³ Daniel Gookin (1674), in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1792, 1st ser., 1, p. 152.

This is the only observed reference in colonial literature, excepting that of Beverley, already mentioned, in which the term *tomahawk* is definitely employed in connection with the stone hatchet of the Indians. The value of Gookin's statement will necessarily depend on the familiarity he may have had with Indian life, and the statement cited may or may not be of greater historical value than the kindred statement of Beverley.

A reference by Josselyn, a year later, definitely relates the term *tomahawk* with the globe-headed club of the natives of New England :

Their weapons of Defence and Offence are Bowes and Arrowes, . . . their other weapons are Tamahawks which are staves two foot and a half long with a knob at the end as round as a bowl, and as big as that we call the Jack or Mistriss.¹

The following is from Rogers :

Another instrument of great esteem and importance among them is the tomahawk. This is an ancient weapon universally used by them in war, before they were taught the use of iron and steel ; since which hatchets have been substituted in lieu of them. But this instrument still retains its use and importance in public transactions ; and, like the pipe, is often very significant. This weapon is formed much like an hatchet, having a long stem or handle ; the head is a round ball or knob of solid wood, well enough calculated to knock men's brains out, which on the other side of the stem terminates in a point where the edge would be, if made an hatchet, which point is set a little hooking or coming towards the stem ; and near the center, where the stem or handle pierces the head, another point projects forward of a considerable length, which serves to thrust with like a spear, or pike-pole.

The tomahawk likewise is ornamented with feathers and paintings, disposed and variegated in many significant forms, according to the occasion and end for which it is used ; and on it they keep journals of their marches, and most important and noted occurrences, in a kind of hieroglyphics. When the council is called to deliberate on war, the tomahawk is painted all over red, and when the council sits it is laid down by the chief : and if war is concluded upon, the captain of the young warriors takes it up, and with it in his hands dances and sings the war-song, as before-mentioned. When the council is over, this hatchet, or some other of the kind, is sent by the hands of some warrior to every tribe concerned, and with it he presents a belt of wampum, and delivers his message, throwing the hatchet on the ground ; which is taken

¹ Josselyn (1675) in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1833, 3d ser., vol. III, p. 309.

up by one of their most expert warriors, if they chuse to join : if not, they return it, and with a belt of their wampum suitable to the occasion.¹

In connection with the above quotation, Rogers gives in the plate opposite page 165 (Knox) an illustration of "a tomahawk" reproduced in our figure 82, *b*, which he took from a figure in Picart's plate 14 (1723), while this in turn came, no doubt, from Beverley's plate reproduced in our figure 83. Although Rogers describes the tomahawk as a globe-headed club, he reproduces, in the plate just mentioned, Picart's globe-headed club and calls it a club instead of a tomahawk. That neither Rogers nor Knox had any first-hand knowledge of the subject treated may well be assumed.

President Dwight, of Harvard College, who had an intimate acquaintance with the New England Indians, beginning about 1770, makes the following statement, indicating clearly the understanding (or misunderstanding) in his time as to the significance of the word *tomahawk* in New England :

Another of the principal weapons was the well-known tomahawk or war club. I had one of these in my possession many years ; in shape not unlike a Turkish sabre, but much shorter, and more clumsy. On it were formed several figures of men, by putting together thin slips of copper, set edge-wise in the wood. Some of them were standing : some of them were prostrated ; and a few had lost their heads. The two last were supposed to denote the number of enemies whom the owner of the tomahawk professed himself to have killed. Since the arrival of the English, they have used fire-arms. To these they add a long knife : and a small battle ax, to which they have transferred the name of Tomahawk. This instrument they are said to throw with such skill, as almost invariably to hit their mark at a considerable distance.²

The observation regarding the transfer of the name *tomahawk* to the battle-ax indicates the understanding in New England that the word *tomahawk*, applied formerly to the war-club, had been at an early date transferred to the small battle-ax (hatchet) of metal.

McCulloh, who wrote at a much more recent date, furnishes the following paragraph :

The tomahawk, which is sometimes considered a weapon peculiar to the American Indians, was originally a club carved into some convenient shape. It was most commonly a stout stick, about three feet in length, terminating in

¹ An Abstract of Major Rogers' Account of North America, in J. Knox's *Voyages and Travels*, London, 1767, II, pp. 165-66.

² Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, 1821, I, p. 118.

a large knob, wherein a projecting bone or flint was often inserted. The hatchets of the Indians that are now called tomahawks, are of European device, and the stone hatchets so often found in our fields, and called by the same term, were not military weapons but mechanical tools.¹

Morgan's interpretations of the tomahawk and related implements do not serve to throw light on the subject. Of the Iroquois, he says :

For cutting trees and excavating canoes, and corn mortars, in a word, for those necessary purposes for which the axe would seem to be indispensable, the Iroquois used the stone chisel, *Uh'-ga-o-gwät'-hä*. In cutting trees, fire was applied at the root, and the chisel used to clear away the coal. By a repetition of the process, trees were felled and cut to pieces. Wooden vessels were hollowed out by the same means. Fire and the chisel were the substitutes for the axe. The chisel was usually about six inches long, three wide, and two thick ; the lower end being fashioned like the edge of an axe. Stone gouges in the form of a convex chisel, were also used when a more regular concavity of the vessel was desired.²

The chisel here described is clearly the celt or stone hatchet blade which was in common use among the Iroquois and neighboring tribes.

Again he states that —

In ancient times the Iroquois used the stone tomahawk. It was fashioned something like an axe, but in place of an eye for the helve, a deep groove was cut around the outside, by means of which the handle was firmly attached with a withe or thong. Oval stones, with grooves around their greatest circumference, were also secured in the head of war-clubs, and thus made dangerous weapons.³

It is thus seen that in Morgan's view the grooved stone ax was the native tomahawk, the celt or hatchet blade being regarded as a chisel, as indicated in the first citation. That Morgan was not clear in his interpretation is further indicated by the statement that "before the tomahawk came into use among the Iroquois, their principal weapons were the bow, the stone tomahawk, and the war-club,"⁴ which statement is almost immediately followed by another :

The tomahawk succeeded the war-club, as the rifle did the bow. With the invention of this terrible implement of warfare the red man had nothing to

¹ McCulloh, *Researches*, 1829, p. 134.

² Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 1904, II, book III, pp. 9-10.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

do, except in having it so fashioned as to be adapted to his taste and usage. The tomahawk is known as widely as the Indian, and the two names have become apparently inseparable. They are made of steel, brass, or iron. The choicer articles are surmounted by a pipe-bowl, and have a perforated handle, that they may answer the double purpose of ornament and use. In such the handle, and often the blade itself, are richly inlaid with silver. It is worn in the girdle, and behind the back, except when in actual battle. They used it in close combat with terrible effect, and also threw it with unerring certainty at distant objects, making it revolve in the air in its flight. With the Indian, the tomahawk is the emblem of war itself. To bury it, is peace; to raise it, is to declare the most deadly warfare.¹

This author thus makes the war-club the predecessor of the steel hatchet, yet if the stone tomahawk existed as a weapon it would have been the natural prototype.

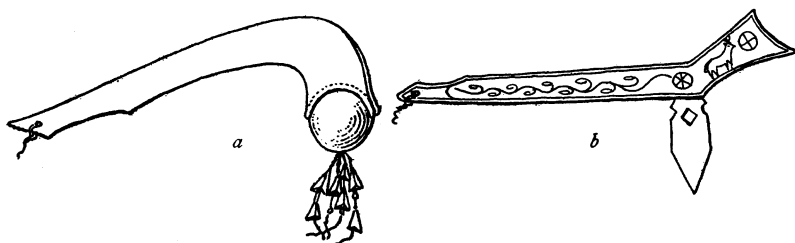


FIG. 86. — Western forms of the tomahawk club.

The details of the origin of the tomahawk-pipe which Morgan illustrates as the “o-sque’-sont [Iroquois], or tomahawk,” may never be known. It came into use in early times, possibly as early as the



FIG. 87. — *a*, Tomahawk-pipe (Morgan). *b*, War-club with deer-horn spike (Morgan).

middle of the eighteenth century. In 1778 Colonel Johnson in writing to Lord Germain said that “the tomahawk which is so much talked of, is seldom used but to smoak thro, or to cut wood with.”²

¹ Morgan, *ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

It would appear from the various citations given that the evidence regarding the native use of the term *tomahawk* is meager and conflicting, and that no very satisfactory conclusion can be reached. It is clear that the word as first recorded by the English was applied definitely to the English metal hatchet by the Virginia Indians and that this use became general among the colonists, being applied later also to the ceremonial hatchet-pipe. The possibility that the name originated outside of Virginia, however, is suggested by the fact that both Smith and Gosnold had cruised along the coast to the north,



FIG. 88. — *a*, War-club (Morgan). *b*, War-club with metal spike.

carrying on trade with the New England Indians, and that a globe-headed club of northern type is depicted in one of the illustrations of Smith's *Works* (fig. 84, *a*). That the name was applied by the Virginia Indians, or by any of the tribes, to the native stone celt-hatchet (fig. 80, *a*) is not fully established. The English colonists applied it not only to the native celt-hatchet, but to the grooved ax, the falchion club, the spiked club, and the plain globe-headed club, and there is no evidence in literature to show whether the natives applied it to a single form exclusively or to two or more forms of weapons, or in fact whether they actually applied it to any, *cun-senagwus* being the only term definitely applied to the native stone hatchet in the literature of the Jamestown colonists.

An appeal to the etymology of the term is of little avail in the premises, as any analysis that may be made of its elements and their significance cannot be effective in determining its application in practice. I shall be glad, however, to leave the discussion of this point to those who can claim especial skill in the languages of the Algonquian tribes.

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